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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TUNIS 001040

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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/FO (GRAY AND CARPENTER)
NEA/MAG (HOPKINS/HARRIS); NEA/PI
LONDON AND PARIS FOR NEA WATCHER

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [TS](#)

SUBJECT: FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION MAIN ISSUE FOR OPPOSITION
PARTY

REF: TUNIS 904

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 B and D

Summary

¶1. (C) On July 26, the Ambassador met with Mohamed Harmel the outgoing Secretary General of the Renewal Movement (Et-Tajdid) party. Harmel spoke at length about the need for greater freedom of expression in Tunisia, including media access and public debate. Referring to President Bush's June 5 Prague speech, the Ambassador emphasized the USG's ongoing commitment to the promotion of democracy and freedom of expression and association. Harmel extended an invitation to the Et-Tajdid party congress on July 27. End summary.

Party Precepts

¶2. (C) The Ambassador met with Mohamed Harmel, Secretary General of the Renewal Movement (Et-Tajdid) party on July 26.

The Renewal Movement was formerly the Tunisian Communist Party, but Harmel emphasized that the 1993 rebirth of the party as the Renewal Movement reflects an ideological shift in the party's principles, not just a change in name. Harmel characterized the Renewal Movement as a non-ideological progressive party that seeks to expand political space for the opposition. He admitted that some members had left once the party was no longer affiliated with communism, but added that the party seeks to create an alliance with intellectuals to foster a true political dialogue. Harmel noted that most of the Renewal Movement's activities are financed by the GOT.

(Note: Since the party holds three dedicated seats in the Chamber of Deputies, it receives government funding. End Note.) He defended the Renewal Movement's decision not to meet with Islamists (including moderates), saying that he supports everyone's rights to free speech, but disagrees with the Islamists' principles and prefers to keep religion and the state separate.

Freedom of Expression

¶3. (C) Regarding freedom of expression, Harmel said that society does criticize the GOT, but only in private. He indicated his goal was to create a forum for this unspoken public opinion within the Renewal Movement. Harmel noted that there is no check on government power, but opined that

public opinion (if expressed publicly) can serve that role. He said that there has been some progress from the days when "we couldn't say anything," but added "we are still not very free." Pointing out that the Renewal Movement's party congress would take place July 27-29, he said the congress would develop a platform that addresses both economic and social issues. Harmel added that he expected 400 participants at the party congress, in addition observers from a few foreign political parties (from Italy, Morocco, Algeria, and Egypt).

14. (C) Harmel said that the Renewal Movement's monthly newspaper experiences occasional problems (i.e. having an occasional issue seized by the GOT). He added that since opposition papers normally have a circulation of 5,000 - 10,000 (not significant), the bigger issue is access to radio and television. He said that the radio stations are all government-owned or government-controlled, and the television is "official and blocked (not available to the opposition)." Harmel opined that opposition parties mainly operate among the elite because government repression of civil society makes the average citizen wary about becoming politically active. He added that the lack of dialogue pushes Tunisians towards radicalism and fosters anti-American sentiment. This sentiment, Harmel said, is fueled by USG actions in the Middle East. He added he believes that the Israeli/Palestinian issue can be settled if quick decisive action is taken by the United States and international partners to push for peace agreement. The Ambassador noted ongoing US efforts to resolve the situation, but added the parties and states in the region must also be committed to peace.

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USG Actions

15. (C) The Ambassador emphasized USG commitment to supporting civil society activists, offering President Bush's June 5 Prague speech as an example of how the USG continues to promote human rights and democracy at the highest levels. Though he queried Harmel as to how he thought the United States could best support civil society in Tunisia, Harmel focused on USG actions in the region, saying he thought the USG should act to counteract the deteriorating situation in Iraq. The Ambassador assured Harmel that the USG is actively involved in an ongoing process to resolve political issues, establish security, and support social and physical reconstruction in Iraq.

Et-Tajdid Congress

16. (C) Harmel extended an invitation to his party congress on July 27. PolOff attended the opening ceremony, which was also attended by prominent members of other opposition parties, including Secretary General of the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) Maya Jeribi and Democratic Forum for Labor and Liberty (FDTL) Secretary General Mustapha Ben Jaafar. (Note: Nejib Chebbi, former Secretary General for the PDP, told PolOff on July 27 that Harmel had been forced out of the Secretary General position by internal party pressure, but opined that Harmel would probably stay on with the Renewal Movement in a ceremonial position and play a role in choosing his successor. End Note.) At the close of the Congress, Harmel was named ex-officio president, while the Secretary General position has yet to be filled. The two

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contenders for the Secretary General position are Ahmed Brahmi (president of Et-Tajdid's National Council) and Hatem Chaabouni (a member of Et-Tajdid's political bureau). (Note: In subsequent conversations with EmbOffs, political figures

who were present at the Congress reported that participants did not reach consensus on a new platform. Forty delegates have been appointed to try to forge a consensus document. End Note.)

Comment

[¶7.](#) (C) Like many other civil society leaders (Ref A), Harmel was vocal about concerns regarding US policy in the region, but welcomed general US support for increased freedom of expression and association. Despite the Renewal Movement's status as a registered opposition party, Harmel indicated he felt his party's activities were constrained by the GOT. End comment.
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